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## **‘Finally a Human Being in this Palace’: How ‘Sissi’ Deals with the Past**

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The characterisation of the 1950s as a ‘lost decade’ captures the perception of the decade as lost within the dominant post-war discourse of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, as well as alluding to its subsequent loss caused by this perception. However, the 1950s are worth being recuperated beyond their recent nostalgic revival in popular culture. This article aims to explore some of the problematic aspects of the discourse on the 1950s and, by means of an exemplary reading of a *Heimatfilm*, to contribute towards a more profound understanding of this decade. The reading will be based on a phenomenological approach to cinematic representation, showing how popular films have implemented and appropriated history in their narratives and thereby participated in people’s dealing with the present and the past.

When, in 1955, the first part of the Sissi-trilogy, *Sissi*, was released, it was an overwhelming commercial success, not only in Germany and Austria but in all of Europe and ultimately, when an adapted version was released, also in America. The two sequels, *Sissi – die junge Kaiserin* and *Sissi – Schicksalsjahre einer Kaiserin*, were equally successful at the box office, and the films remain, until the present, amongst the most popular films in the German language, comparable with *Gone with the Wind* in American cinema.<sup>1</sup> Romy Schneider became the first German pop star after the Second World War and was venerated by a whole generation of teenage girls and their mothers. Whilst the audience celebrated the films, the critics’ reactions were divided: some praised the lavish *décor* and the actress Romy Schneider, others remained reserved. The latter dismissed the film as ‘costume spectacle’, as the Austrian equivalent to the German *Heimatfilm*,<sup>2</sup> and, hence, as pompous kitsch. Subsequently, a debate emerged about whether these films could be called art or whether they were mere entertainment which, by drawing an idyllic, sugar-coated world, would surrender to mere wish fulfilment and escapism. The latter view has persisted in the scholarly reception of these films for decades and helped shape our image of the 1950s.<sup>3</sup>

The debate that developed around the *Sissi*-trilogy is symptomatic of the reaction to popular culture in the 1950s and is the result of the concurrence of two prevalent discourses within the humanities, the discourse of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* on the one hand, and the discourse about film-as-art, with its origins in the 1920s,<sup>4</sup> on the other. They converged and were amalgamated to form a picture of the fifties as a conservative and restorative era during which the Germans suppressed their past and escaped into the colourful world of consumerism provided by the economic miracle. Both discourses were of paramount significance immediately after the defeat of the Third Reich. Whilst *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* set the standards for coping with the past, the discourse on film tried to re-establish film's standing which was tainted more than that of any other medium because of the role it played in Goebbels' propaganda machinery and the obvious continuity in the film business after the war. Within this discourse on film, the simple fact that a film was successful, that it appealed to the masses, was suspect. The cause for this mistrust appears to lie in the underlying assumption that the audience craves for delusion within which it can lose itself whilst an art film does not provide such delusion: for, by means of a self-reflexive deployment of film's medium specific devices, an art film is thought to inspire an equally self-reflexive attitude in the viewer's mind. In contrast, films such as *Sissi* (or, for that matter, the entire *Heimatfilm* genre) followed the conventional narrative paradigm of the classical Hollywood era, in which the medium specific techniques (lighting, camera etc.) were subservient to the exigencies of the realist narrative. The techniques vanish behind the story in order to create a realistic narrative space – or, in the vernacular of the film critics: an illusion. Such a discourse evidently ties in effortlessly with the view on the fifties as an escapist decade: mastering the past amounts in this context to a normative discourse guided by very specific ideas of how this mastering was to manifest itself, namely in a self-conscious reflective coping with the atrocities the Germans had committed as a collective. The apparent lack of such an attitude was therefore interpreted as a mere avoidance strategy indicative of repressed guilt or as the consequence of a childlike behaviour, which was also identified as the cause of the Germans' susceptibility to National Socialism.<sup>5</sup> Other ways in which the past was possibly dealt with remained neglected in and by this discourse. When appraised more closely, though, the seemingly all explanatory notion of 'escapism' falls short of acknowledging that films such as *Sissi*, and other examples of the genre, were a means of dealing with the

present and the past. In fact, the way in which those films addressed past and present contributed towards a German cultural memory and should therefore not be neglected.<sup>6</sup> Both discourses are more concerned with an ideal, with how things should have been rather than with how they really were.

These discourses tacitly presupposed a rigid distinction between ‘fiction’ and an objective, given ‘reality’ as the backdrop against which this kind of film was read. In contrast, the approach proposed in this article will give a new perspective on those films on the grounds of an experience-based notion of reality; that is the subjective reality by which the experienced world is constituted: ‘Whether as a victor or as the one defeated, deep down at the level of individual fears and private concerns, history was experienced as private.’<sup>7</sup>

On the level of the everyday, historical events are grasped in terms of private experience. This experience is constructed in concentric circles of ‘Care’<sup>8</sup> around the individual. History *per se* is perceived as lying beyond the scope of these circles whilst conventional narrative in fiction film adopts and implements it within the sphere of these circles. In this paper, I suggest a way of reading *Sissi* which avoids imposing moral categories on matters of entertainment<sup>9</sup> and, instead, considers conventionalised narrative as a common device to reconstruct history from a private perspective by appropriating it to these familiar narrative patterns. Since the audience’s expectations shape the perception of films, especially of genre films,<sup>10</sup> realism in the cinema depends primarily on how the audience conceives of reality. Therefore, it seems helpful to describe reality as experienced ‘reality’ and to understand it as an effort to align already existing narratives and iconographies with as yet unnarrativised experience.<sup>11</sup> As opposed to documentaries, fiction films can be described as an attempt to construct a narrative by means of which history is made tangible in terms of personal experience.

*Sissi*, and the *Heimatfilm* in general, could be considered as an alignment of Hollywood’s narrative conventions<sup>12</sup> and iconographies with this specific historical moment that could not yet be grasped. Realism in those films, hence, depends neither on a naturalist setting nor on a story of common people, since ‘commonness’ is rather created by the way in which the story is told, and thus relies on the *discours* or plot (rather than the story or *histoire*). Reviews have praised Romy Schneider enthusiastically for ‘incorporating, despite her historical costumes and the sentimentality which such films bring along, a modern girl.’<sup>13</sup> The possibility of

relating to the character *despite not because* of all the fiction surrounding her appears to be crucial for the film's appeal. This also shows that films and their extended discourses (advertisement, reviews, columns, etc.) enter into a reciprocal relationship with the audience and reveal the perceptual framework that shapes the spectator's expectation.

In the following analysis I will focus on the first and second film of the trilogy only. They are set at the incipient downfall of the old Austro-Hungarian Empire. The first part, *Sissi*, revolves around the love story between Sissi and the Emperor of Austria Franz Josef: Franz Josef is supposed to marry in order to demonstrate and preserve the stability of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and its reigning dynasty after an assassination attempt against him. His mother selects the first daughter of the Duke of Bavaria as a suitable wife for him. The mothers arrange that their children should meet in Ischgl on the Emperor's birthday. However, the Emperor falls in love with the second daughter, Elisabeth, called Sissi. Sissi, raised in a natural, informal environment, cannot accommodate herself to the strict etiquette of the Viennese court. The second part of the film focuses on Sissi's growing into her role as Empress without losing her genuine nature. Under the permanent strict surveillance of her mother-in-law, Sissi has to decide between her old lifestyle and her love for Franz Josef.

The film's introductory sequence establishes the natural environment by panning over the alpine coulisse around the Lake of Starnberg up to the summer residence of Sissi's family. The next shot tracks four fishermen on a raft, yodelling a traditional melody which evokes a pure country morning. They interrupt their song to greet Duke Max who stands on the shore and responds in the local dialect. The following few scenes characterise the Duke as a casual, common man who has a gusto for the simple things in life. Both the scenery, typical of the *Heimatfilm* genre, and the repeatedly prolonged panoramic shots of nature, which are not necessary for the development of the story, aim to characterise the protagonists by virtue of their environment. Accordingly, the heroine does not enter the scene until the spectator has received this long introduction to the atmosphere she grew up in, a technique which emphasises the genuine connection between her character and nature. The first scene, where she is depicted as a reckless horsewoman and maternal animal-lover, attests to her authentic naturalness unblemished by her noble descent: Sissi remained a 'normal girl'. When she walks with her father in the woods, he philosophises:

Should your life ever bring trouble or sorrow, then go through the woods with open eyes. In every tree and bush, in every flower and every animal you will observe the omnipotence of God, which will give you solace and strength.<sup>14</sup>

These words, which hark back to the so-called *Wandervogel* movement – so popular in Germany and Austria at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – , echo the post-romantic conceptual convergence of personality and nature which plays an essential role in the creation of the notion of *Heimat*. In this context, *Heimat* does not denote a concrete place but a sense of belonging, i.e. a source of the characters' authenticity. This deep connection thus depicts these characters as genuine, as truly human. In general, the exposition points to a deeper bond between the characters and nature as their source of rejuvenation,<sup>15</sup> a bond which works as a warrant for the humanity of the protagonists' actions in the course of the film.

It is therefore no surprise that it is precisely Sissi's 'natural grace' that appeals to Franz Josef who prefers Sissi to her sister. Within the logic of the discourse of authenticity, it is inevitable that Franz Josef and Sissi meet in nature as 'normal people' so as to exemplify the truthfulness and authenticity of their love. Being removed from the daily routine of the court, along with the fact that Franz Josef – not recognising her as his cousin Elisabeth – falls in love with what he thinks is a simple girl from Bavaria, is crucial in order to contrast their love with the matchmaking of their mothers.

The discourse on Sissi's naturalness also forms the basis for the 'tragic' constellation which propels the plot forward and is encapsulated in Sissi's remark: 'If only I could always be with you like this: you no emperor and I no Empress.' The palace with its strict rules and golden doors forms the antithesis to Sissi's natural character and the '*locus amoenus*' of her childhood. When Sissi's father pronounces his active dislike of Franz Joseph's mother (his wife's sister) and when his wife, in response to this, reminds him of his royal descent and insists on a more formal attitude towards her sister, this opposition is anticipated. Franz Josef's mother, the Archduchess Sophie, embodies the fossil etiquette of the court which, shaped by centuries of tradition, suffocates all natural life that surrounds it. Consequently, in stark contrast to Franz Joseph and Sissi, the Emperor's mother is never shown in a natural environment. Her scope of influence is entirely restricted to the interior of the palace.

The dichotomy between the two places Starnberg and Vienna harks back to the dichotomy between city and country established at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In *Sissi*, the artificiality of an outdated, cumbrous regime features as a topos of decadence which threatens humanity or humanness (*Menschlichkeit*). The crucial point in this constellation is the way in which the generational conflict is interwoven with the discourse of authenticity: whilst, through the antithetical topography, the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire is ascribed to its fossilised adherence to an inhuman tradition, the source of rejuvenation lies in the loaded concept of *Heimat*. Whilst the Palace stands for an inhuman, impersonal system, for oppression and death (from the perspective of the occupied people), nature and *Heimat* stand for human dignity and the realisation of an authentic individual. The way this familiar discourse is used in *Sissi* elucidates people's conception of the historical situation in Germany (and Austria). The Habsburg Monarchy with its rigid routines functions as an analogy for the rise of the Nazi state. Like the leadership of the Habsburg family, the dictatorship was perceived within the confines of a degenerated or even perverted elite of few leaders who were not guided by the principles of humanity. Thus previously existing discourses of authenticity are inscribed in the topography of *Sissi* whilst, at the same time, they are also used to transform the historical perspective according to people's private everyday narratives of history: this transformation ultimately turns the original fascist master narrative upside down. The film adopts a view that considers the Nazi state as the logical consequence of capitalism, self-alienation and de-humanisation and not, as Nazi ideology would have it, as a consequence of a recuperation of humanism within a *Heimat* and *Blut und Boden* discourse. The discourse of *Heimat* could thereby remain intact and still serve as a signifier for 'normality' and humanness anchored in a notion of authenticity. Hence, the Nazi state and its agents could be depicted as abnormal and monstrous, evoking some (pleasurable) shiver when exhibited at the Nuremberg and Frankfurt trials, whereas questions about one's own role in the system remained within the boundaries of private experience.

The narrative structure further substantiates this transformation of history. The discourse underlying the first film demonstrates the fundamental structure on which a 'timeless' story is based: an unpredictable fate is inflicted upon a genuine heroine. This structure is an essential feature not only in conventional film narration but also reflects the way in which history is appropriated to people's everyday perception. It

shows how history is experienced as being beyond the scope of the individual and its narrative 'privatisation' is structured according to this experience.<sup>16</sup> Consequently, it is depicted as a fate-like power (as a force beyond human control) which imposes upon a character whose attempts to come to terms with his or her fate constitutes the plot. As has been argued above, 'reality' is not necessarily guided by a 'naturalistic' setting but, rather, by the way in which a story is told from the perspective of a single (or of several) protagonist(s). The historical dimension represented in the *Sissi* trilogy is structured according to these rules. A number of causes (political situation, mothers' marriage scheme, accidental encounter, love) are condensed until they form an impenetrable, fate-like nexus that happens to impose upon the normal girl Sissi. The consistency of her character and her actions is therefore at the centre of narrative realism. If we think of the original telling situations, we can imagine that a story is only told when it is relevant to the listeners. It is only relevant when the experience told is somehow transferable to the listener. This relevance is achieved by translating an abstract morale into the experience of a single character. The film's 'timeless' story and its concomitant analogy to the actual political situation lend it a highly realistic potential. The reviews of these films testify to the importance of the discourse of authenticity for the creation of 'normality' and substantiate the reciprocal relationship between on- and off-screen reality: Romy Schneider (who was only 17 years old at the time) was celebrated as an 'original talent', as 'completely natural and unpretentious' and it was said that one never senses 'that she actually plays her role.' As the quotation cited above suggests, she was seen as 'incorporating, despite her historical costumes and the sentimentality which such films bring along, a modern girl.' In the same vein, her fame was depicted as a burden which hardly left any space for personal freedom – a representation of Romy Schneider's biography that accorded with the character she played on screen.

Classical techniques such as three-point lighting, constant reframing and continuity editing which shaped narrative conventions in classical Hollywood cinema in the 1930s support the creation of an experiencing individual as point of reference for the spectator: they fashion the cinematic space around the heroine. The represented space is explored from her perspective, her actions and her motivations.

The first part of *Sissi* thus focuses predominantly on the private story and establishes the contradicting worlds. Realism is to be found in the way in which Sissi is depicted as a normal girl, on and off the screen. Her normality is established by



familiar motifs, such as family, nature, her belief in love, her good heart, etc. In a way, Sissi is the girl who is drawn into politics by her naivety and her love. On the basis of the familiar discourses of authenticity, the next film deals more overtly with social and political issues prevalent in the post-war decade.

At the beginning of the first film, a friend of Max's says inadvertently: 'Yes, "Sopherl" (*checking himself, turning towards the duchess*), your highness's sister, (*turning back to Max*) is the only real man at that court.' In a comical manner this statement states a detachment of biological sex and social gender and thereby implicitly addresses the crisis of gender roles in the 1950s. Franz Josef's character is the one who is constantly torn between the two worlds of Sissi and his mother. Strongly determined by his mother's education, his attraction to Sissi demonstrates his readiness for a new era (which goes along with the acknowledgment that the old Empire is about to collapse). Compared to Sissi, Franz Josef, the male character, is initially surprisingly weak and submissive to his mother's and his wife's wishes. He appears to be trapped between two roles: his role as Emperor, which demands archetypal masculine qualities, and his life as a private man, which requires traditionally feminine qualities. He has to mediate between his mother and his wife, between tradition and innovation, between duty and feeling. Thus the generational conflict is intertwined with the renegotiation of gender roles in a time of transition and crisis. It is not accidental that all the other male characters somehow seem to have retreated from state affairs: Duke Max indulges in the simple enjoyments of life in his retreat in Possenhofen whilst Franz Josef's father seeks refuge in his feigned deafness. Accordingly, Karl Heinz Böhm, as the male hero, lacks the physical qualities of his predecessors in German movie dream couples: his androgynous stature and empathetic features distance him from former male archetypes in German cinema such as Carl Raddatz or Willy Fritsch, who exhibit boastful self-confidence. In addition, the relationship between Franz Josef and Sissi is also fundamentally different from that of previous film couples: whilst earlier screen husbands would relegate female protagonists to their allotted place behind the stove, Franz shares the feelings of his wife, supports her actions and aligns himself with them. When, in the second film, Sissi takes unusual measures to prevent a scandal with Hungarian representatives, he rejects his mother's protest: 'I do not yet know why Sissi takes this unusual measure, but naturally, I identify with everything she does.'

This change of the male role model clearly addresses the situation in post-war Germany. The male role model was much more destabilised after the war than the female one, since the German notion of masculinity was based on military virtues of fighting and defending the nation, of being the provider of the family.<sup>17</sup> But this, of course, had changed when they came back from the war. Nevertheless, even decades later, when reconstructing their lives, men would usually emphasise their war experience and their subsequent career. Times of crisis are usually omitted or told in passive voice (the German 'man'), and hence depicted as more general crisis of society. Franz Josef, the Emperor, illustrates this crisis of male virtues. On the one hand, his uniform and his preservation of tradition and duty are symbolic remnants of a glorious past, still incorporated and enacted by his mother; a past from which Franz Joseph has to liberate himself in the course of the film. On the other hand, Franz Josef incorporates the experienced powerlessness and the necessity of change. Thus, in the end, the character contributes to a negotiation of a new role model: his character represents a fruitful amalgamation of the two poles. He embodies a modern man, who seeks self-realisation and happiness in private life, who is steady and sensitive: that is he becomes an authentic character himself. Thus, masculine identity is refashioned according to traditional feminine characteristics. This, naturally, affects his public face too. Franz Josef's decision for Sissi, therefore, encapsulates the political agenda to which the film is committed: deciding for Sissi is not a decision restricted to the private sphere, but has an impact on politics as a whole insofar as, with Sissi, Franz Josef decides for a new system based on humanity and authenticity. This new course allows for a new conception of nationhood and state in which Franz Josef still exhibits executive powers; however, at the same time, those powers appear unnecessary, for this new conception of nation relies on the integrative power of (emotional) conviction. This adjustment is rewarded with his and Sissi's coronation as King and Queen of Hungary, and thus with the reconciliation of the two empires.

The depiction of the female heroine is consistent with this renegotiation of the masculine gender model: it draws on familiar and common imagery, and thereby offers a possibility to recreate national identity. Female figures are traditionally used to symbolise the nation, as opposed to the state, which is rather allegorised by male figures. Whilst masculinity is defined by active attributes, nation is based on a notion of integration. Internal integration is conceived of as an achievement of motherly care. This image of the nation was an image still available to reconstruct identity. It also

fell on fertile ground insofar as it met with a wide-spread feeling concerning gender roles after the war. As mentioned above, the cultural function of women – that is, how women conceived of their role in post-war Germany – was not subject to such fundamental change, notwithstanding the fact that women had become the provider of their families after the war. When the POWs returned at the beginning of the 1950s, this growing independence of women was reversed again. Women themselves could formulate and acknowledge their strength almost exclusively within a discourse of motherhood and in their support for their defeated men. Therefore, the attributes on which the allegory of nation was based provided a pre-existing link, a still functional narrative in the reconstruction of identity. Sissi's journey on the Danube at the end of the first film, therefore, does not accidentally draw on iconographies that reflect on traditional female representations of nationhood: shots of Sissi, in a white dress with a red robe from behind, giving us her view on the old castles and churches built along the river, alternate with shots showing her from the perspective of the cheering crowds on the shore. The reverse-angle shot between Sissi and the crowd, commonly used for filming conversations, gains additional resonance in this context: it creates a kind of dialogue between them, and thereby distinguishes her as the rightful representative of the people – a dubious distortion of democratic principles and, it should be noted, a technique that was quite common in NS cinema, e.g. in Leni Riefenstahl's depiction of crowds, too. The sequence visually merges symbols of a glorious and legitimate past with the discourse of renewal and symbols of leadership and authenticity to generate a new notion of nation.

The ending of the second part parallels the spectacular ending of the first part. In embracing her role as Empress, Sissi overcomes her own escapist tendencies (reflected in the quote above, 'If only you weren't Emperor') at the end of the second film, and settles the conflict with her mother-in-law, that is with the old Empire. The story of her adolescence is completed and the opposing spheres (*Heimat* – Austria, private – public, emotion – duty) are merged into one integrated nation. The process of Sissi's maturing and the maturation of the nation are thus paralleled, and they mirror each other as successful stories about identity formation. Hence, the second film can conclude with Franz Joseph's and Sissi's coronation as King and Queen of Hungary. The film ends with a long close up of Sissi crying.

The 'happy endings', however, are not brought about by politics but originate in Sissi's personal qualities, in love and care, in authenticity and naturalness, which is

distilled in a notion of human dignity, so that 'being human' alone turns into a rebellious act. Resistance appears as an action detached from political agency and, instead, is constrained to the purely private sphere of emotion. It thus boils down to the simple fact of 'being human'.

This observation is confirmed by the memorable scene in which Count Andrazsé, the former Hungarian revolutionary, seeks an audience with Sissi in order to express the gratitude of the Hungarians. To Sissi's response that it was the Emperor who decreed the amnesty he replies:

I am not referring to the amnesty. An amnesty cannot give back their lives to the executed and happiness to the haunted families. But a heart that beats for a nation can make good for everything. And it is this love I want to thank your Majesty for.<sup>18</sup>

Hence, it is not the actual political act but just the fact 'that a heart beats for a nation' that can achieve reconciliation. It is actually Sissi who, simply through her authentic nature, reconciles the two empires. Politics is actually replaced by empathic emotion and personality. Consequently, the Hungarian deputy utters: 'Finally, a human being in this palace.'

This turn to the private is an intrinsic quality of the narrative itself. Privatisation, after all, is the depiction of human action on the basis of psychologisation, which makes the action comprehensible within a framework of everyday experience. Since heroic action was objectionable in the 1950s and it was no longer acceptable to die for 'King and Country', the motives for the action had to be backed up by the authenticity of the main character. The grandiose set-up of Sissi's naturalness consequently appears as a necessary device for an action that could not get its legitimisation from its commitment to a 'good cause'.

Again, the parallels to the reality of the 1950s and how it was experienced are numerous. The Nazi state was retrospectively perceived as a degeneration of the previous political and economic system. Or it was seen as the incarnation of an inhuman system, a view in which the crimes committed by the regime were somehow acknowledged, but in which the idea of a collective guilt remained detached from the private realm. What prevailed on the private level was a notion of betrayal (that emerged after Stalingrad and during the early 1940s in the bunkers) and probably a genuine incomprehension as to how events connect with each other in the wider scheme of history. It is crucial to see that the detachment of private and collective

guilt was supported (if not generated) by the rather naive dealings of the American's denazification program that suggested that one could single out the perpetrators by their ideological conviction; as if the state relied on ideological conviction alone. The reality is more complex and maybe more frightening: a major part of the so-called 'ideology' forms an essential part of the conceptual framework of everyday experience. It could not be distilled and stamped out like a disease. Reading popular films therefore helps us understand on which pillars this everyday perception and construction rested. I want to give one final example, which anticipates a development in the seventies: When the mini-series *Holocaust* was finally released in Germany, it was – to the dismay of many film scholars – an incredible success in Germany.<sup>19</sup> It was this series that eventually gave a name to a hitherto unexpressed and, hence, inaccessible crime; a name and a story that enabled people – survivors as well as members of the perpetrator nation – to refer to this historical event from the graspable perspectives of 'normal people'.

Returning, in conclusion, to the films discussed in this article, one could say that the end of the second film confronts us, in a distilled form, with all the different motifs discussed in this paper: the long close-up of Sissi's face, in focusing, once more, on her natural character, stresses her genuineness and thereby ascribes the happy outcome to her personality. The close-up is a final summary of the narrative structure: the story begins and ends with the protagonist and only distances spatially from her when narrative exigencies make it necessary. At the end of the film, everything comes back to her. Thereby, the denouement emphasises the triumph of humanity and turns into a plea for human values, since it is Sissi's natural, friendly behaviour that achieved the reconciliation between two nations, and not the male strategy of war or politics. This way of reinstating political agency also affects the way in which history is told. It transfers the historical narrative to the stories of 'common men' by retelling the historical narrative through the lens of the 'common man' who could not change the larger course of events but, in remaining faithful to human values, undertook little acts of resistance. History is no longer modelled according to a master narrative dominated by actions and events, arranged in a chronicle. It is no longer a male history of great men and action, but it is a prismatic history of small acts and little stories, assignable to the feminine sphere of action. The films thereby reflect on an ongoing discourse since the early post-war years: the rediscovery of humanness which was played off against the reigning politics. It was

fused with the discourse on gender in order to reconstruct a masculine imagery that would no longer be acceptable for the foundation of a new German state. Rubble films<sup>20</sup> such as Helmut Käutner's *In jenen Tagen* (1946) feature as predecessors to *Sissi* because they focus on the human sphere, on the scope of the common man. *Sissi* does not simply offer an escape into a fairytale's dream world, but the film's personal and emotional topography, the gender and generation issues addressed, show strong correlations to the reality in Germany and Austria at that time. The strong plea for humanness reflects the development in cinematic and personal narration since 1945 respectively.

A different perspective on *Sissi* and *Heimatfilm* can therefore help us shed light on a reality of the 1950s that was obscured by the normative discourse of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*. It helps to further understand the way in which people remodelled their lives according to pre-existing models which made historical reality accessible to them. History's privatisation plays a crucial role in making sense of one's own life, even though this frequently seems inadequate to the historical events it thus reconstructs.

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<sup>1</sup> Werner Faulstich and Helmut Korte, *Fischer Filmgeschichte*, 5 vols., vol. 3, *Fischer Cinema* (Frankfurt am Main, 1990), p. 24

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Studies such as Willi Höfig, *Der deutsche Heimatfilm* (Stuttgart, 1973), Anton Kaes, *From Hitler to Heimat: The Return of History as Film* (Cambridge, Mass. and London, 1989), or Jürgen Trimborn, *Der deutsche Heimatfilm der fünfziger Jahre: Motive, Symbole, Handlungsmuster* (Köln, 1998) testify to that tendency.

<sup>4</sup> Anton Kaes, *Kino-Debatte: Texte zum Verhältnis von Literatur und Film 1909-1929*, Deutsche Texte, 48 (München and Tübingen, 1978).

<sup>5</sup> The work by Alexander Mitscherlich and Margarete Mitscherlich, *Die Unfähigkeit zu trauern: Grundlagen kollektiven Verhaltens*, Serie Piper, 168 (München, 1977) represents the most influential study of that kind. See also: Eric L. Santner, *Stranded Objects: Mourning, Memory, and Film in Postwar Germany* (Ithaca, 1990).

<sup>6</sup> More recent studies show a decisive change in scholarly attention: Johannes von Moltke, *No Place like Home: Locations of Heimat in German Cinema, Weimar and Now*, 36 (Berkeley, Calif. and London, 2005).

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<sup>7</sup> Thomas Brandlmeier, 'Von Hitler zu Adenauer', in *Zwischen Gestern und Morgen. Westdeutscher Nachkriegsfilm 1946 -1962*, ed. by Hilmar Hoffmann and Walter Schober (Frankfurt am Main, 1989), p. 57 (my translation).

<sup>8</sup> I borrow this concept from Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time*.

<sup>9</sup> Marc Silbermann addresses this issue in his essay on 'Schwarzwaldmädel'. Marc Silberman, *German Cinema: Texts in Context*, Contemporary Film and Television series (Detroit, 1995), pp. 114-127.

<sup>10</sup> Thomas Schatz, *Hollywood Genres: Formulas, Filmmaking, and the Studio System* (Philadelphia and Boston, 1981).

<sup>11</sup> Recently, scholars in literary criticism as well as film studies took interest in approaches based on the spectator's cognitive activity in the construction of a narrative. Monika Fludernik, *Towards a 'Natural' Narratology* (London, 1996) should be mentioned as an example in literary criticism as well as David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* (London, 1985), and Edward Branigan, 'Point of View in the Fiction Film', in *Wide Angle: A Film Quarterly of Theory, Criticism, and Practice*, 8 (1986) in the field of film studies.

<sup>12</sup> David Bordwell sets out the basic principles of Hollywood narration in David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema : Film Style & Mode of Production to 1960* (London, 1988).

<sup>13</sup> My italics, my translation, the anonymous review dates from 10.12.1955 and is archived in the German Film Institute, Frankfurt.

<sup>14</sup> Translation by Von Moltke: *No Place like Home*, p. 94.

<sup>15</sup> Further accounts of how nature and the concept of youth/generation were fused can be found in: Thomas Koebner, Rolf-Peter Janz, and Frank Trommler, eds., *'Mit uns zieht die neue Zeit': Der Mythos der Jugend*, Edition Suhrkamp (Frankfurt am Main, 1985).

<sup>16</sup> Lutz Niethammer, "'Normalization' in the West: Traces of Memory Leading Back into the 1950s," in *The Miracle Years: A Cultural History of West Germany, 1949-1968*, ed. by Hanna Schissler (Princeton and Oxford, 2001).

<sup>17</sup> For the reconstruction of masculinity, see e.g: Frank Biess, 'Survivors of Totalitarianism: Returning POW's and the Reconstruction of Masculine Citizenship in West Germany, 1945-1955', in *The Miracle Years: A Cultural History of West Germany 1949-1968*, ed. by Hanna Schissler (Princeton and Oxford, 2001). For the

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construction of gender within the family and war stories, see: Harald Welzer, Sabine Moller, and Karoline Tschugnall, *'Opa war kein Nazi': Nationalsozialismus und Familiengedächtnis*, 4th edition (Frankfurt am Main, 2003). For biographical accounts of couples: Claire Duchon and Irene Bandhauer-Schöffmann, *When the War Was over: Women, War, and Peace in Europe, 1940-1956* (London, 2000). On the role of women, see: Elizabeth Heineman, 'The Hour of the Women: Memories of Germany's "Crisis Years" and West German National Identity', in *The Miracle Years: A Cultural History of West Germany*, ed. by Hanna Schissler (Princeton and Oxford, 2001).

<sup>18</sup> Marischka, *Sissi – die junge Kaiserin*.

<sup>19</sup> Anton Kaes, *From Hitler to Heimat: The Return of History as Film* (Cambridge, Mass. and London, 1989).